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ABSTRACT

Noting that the predominant questions about characters in literature exams steer students away from reflection about the characters, this booklet on constructing exam questions analyzes current failures in character studies and reviews existing starting-points for an alternate approach. The firt section--on limiting assumptions in current character questions--discusses how wording misdirects response and the students' choices of the personal and impersonal stance, the informality/formality of the relation with the reader, and the degree of assertiveness/tentativeness. The second section--on emerging alternatives--discusses responses that start from the particulars of the characters, looks at key words and their implications and assumptions, and summarizes the kinds of guidance teachers should offer their students before they write their character sketches, in terms of writing from a personal stance, the role of the teacher as reader, dealing with the general and the particular, and keeping character assessments exploratory and tentative. Finally, the booklet discusses suggestions for working these ideas out in practice. (EL)

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Response to Literature

Booklet 1

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CHARACTER STUDIES - CHANGING THE QUESTION

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1985

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Why character study

Questions about characters are the predominant type in Literature exams at 16+. Thus in Summer 1979 Barnes and Seed found that 'character description and interpretation' together with 'thematic reading' accounted for almost 70% of the papers. Indeed, as they said, "on one paper (Oxford Local, General) these constitute the only types of writing about literature made available to the candidates"[1]. The general situation in 1984 seems to be much the same.

Of course, from the early days of English Studies in the university there has been a continuous tradition of focussing on character within the novel or the play. And despite L. C. Knights' mocking question - How many children had Lady Macbeth?[2] - studies of character seem to have survived many of the movements of post-war criticism.

In many ways, this continuing interest is not hard to understand: it is difficult to imagine literature surviving without it! Curiosity about people, the way they interact, their inner thoughts and feelings, and the deeper driving forces that shape their lives and personalities, must be one of the main impulses behind the writer (just as it is for us, as readers and spectators). Literature presents a range of people we have never met and opens up ways of looking at them that may not have struck us. Besides, through soliloquy, stream of consciousness and narrator's interpretation, the writer gives a kind of privileged access into the minds of characters.

But it is not only the interest in fictional characters found within the literary critical tradition that has helped to shape this central interest in 'character description and interpretation' in schools. Teachers' experience also tells tham that their adolescent pupils are very often much caught up with the possibilities in other people's lives - day-dreaming about what it would be like, identifying themselves with heroes and heroines (in real life as much as in fiction) and simply beginning to move out of the egocentric and to ask questions about friends, relatives and neighbours. People fascinate them.

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Furthermore, whether intuitively or consciously, many teachers are also aware of the way students read at this phase of their development: how often they live the work, lost inside the imaginative experience, alongside or even within a character that seizes them.

It is not surprising, then, that teachers of adolescents should focus so often on the characters in a play or novel - especially the ways they behave, interact, think and feel at crucial moments in the story.

Nevertheless, adolescence is not an easy time to size up people and make judgements about them; uncertainty about who you really are often leads to uncertainties or conflicting ambiguities in your sympathies and stance. There is every reason to encourage the students to stand back and reflect on their personal judgements. So the teaching of literature, at its best, and specifically the exploration of character has something really important to offer. Unfortunately, having said all this, it is the considered view of our SREB seminar group that most of the 16+ examinations, with their traditional forms of character question, are pointing teachers and students away from all these things, and notably away from the development of personal judgement.

This booklet, then, analyses current failures in character studies and reviews existing starting-points for an alternative approach.

SECTION 1 Limiting assumptions in current character questions

In the course of the seminars we have all learnt to look much more carefully at the precise wording of exam questions (or course work assignments). Even single words can have important effects in constraining students as they write, and also in revealing what must often be unconscious assumptions about "character study" - and response to literature.

For our first example we propose to look closely at a fairly characteristic question, which happens to fall in two parts (and in doing so reveals interesting ambiguities in the questioner's attitudes). Here is the question: what is it indicating to the student writer?

> Describe the character of Bernard Marx showing how it changes throughout the novel, "Brave New World". Do you have any sympathy for his situation?

Let us begin with the key words in the first sentence and what they seem to imply or assume.

KEY WORDS	THEIR IMPLICATIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS
The character .....it	This carries an assumption about the kind of literary response that is called for: - recall of pre-existing and definitive "knowledge" seems to be expected; - "the character" is thought of not as a "person" but as an "it": an abstracted and depersonalised analysis seems to be required (possibly in the form of a bundle of traits?)
changes throughout	This requires a consideration of the character's activities in the whole of the novel (though the time allowed will normally force the student to generalise and to be extremely summary).
describe... showing how	Words like these set up the student's authorial position or "role", suggesting in this case:

KEY WORDS	THEIR IMPLICATIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS
	- already "prepared" knowledge, which can be authoritatively "shown" to an imaginary reader; - "described" in low level generalisation (given the time allowed); - the stance being predominantly matter of fact and objective, thus tacitly ignoring (if not ruling out) the student's sympathies or antipathies.

Some of these implications are surprising, yet we have found them to be very typical of exam questions across the boards. Do we, as teachers and examiners, really believe that at 16+ characters are primarily to be treated in an abstracted and depersonalised way? Is a bundle of fixed traits all that we expect when a complex, and possibly ambiguous, character has been studied with care? Do we not wish students to tease out the subtleties of character in interaction, within a crucial scene? Is it reasonable to expect 16 year-olds to pretend to write with authority, like mature literary critics? And is literary appreciation a matter of factual, objective and definitive knowledge?

It is difficult to understand how teachers (at all levels) have come to accept such a tradition. These are problems this booklet must return to. But first, let us see how this part of our initial question on Bernard Marx affects the way a reasonably competent 16 year-old sets about her answer. Here are her opening two paragraphs:

> Bernard Marx is a complicated character. In the beginning of the novel he is seen as a person who is an individual with his own feelings, something we do not see in others. His views and personal thoughts on the action of others around him are portrayed. "Idiots, swine!" Bernard Marx was saying to himself as he walked down the corridor to the lift.
>
> When Bernard Marx first enters the novel we see him as someone of the Brave New World with a high rank in

society. He is an alpha plus and is a specialist on hypnopaedia. He seems to be different from others, thinks of himself as an individual which is something forbidden in the Brave New World. This makes us think that maybe he is a 'cut above the rest' and thinks things out for himself. Then we get the opinion of others who know Bernard in the Brave New World. The first comes from Lenina. She thinks of him as sweet and that he ought to be petted. This instantly reveals Bernard's character. He likes to fade into the background and stay out of people's way. He does not like to become involved and keeps himself to himself. This, on its own earns him a strange reputation but in the Brave New World society this is highly irregular. Everyone is open minded and is supposed to act together as one whole gathering.

"Everyone belongs to everyone else."

Here is a student who has a clear notion of what is expected in this type of essay, we would claim, and who has noted scrupulously what the key words in the title require. What she has written is typical of thousands of others. What kind of "character study" does this produce?

Because she must consider "changes" in the character "throughout" the whole novel, this conscientious student has to face the problem of stating in two paragraphs what Bernard Marks is like "in the beginning", "when (he) first enters". Moreover, as she says, he "is a complicated character". But the only strategy open to her is to list general traits:

- an individual with his own feelings
- with a high rank in society .. an alpha plus
- a specialist on hypnopaedia
- thinks of himself as an individual .. different from others
- maybe .. 'a cut above the rest'
- thinks things out for himself
- sweet .. ought to be petted (Lenina thinks)
- likes to fade into the background

- does not like to become involved
- keeps himself to himself
- earns .. a strange reputation .. highly irregular

There are two things to be said. First, people cannot help but sum up complex characters - whether in fiction or in real life - in order to make some initial sense of their behaviour. But, second, if we stop there, we miss their fundamental individuality, and, equally important, the inevitable ambiguities and contradictions in what they do, say, think and feel. Thus, if the thrust of the questions (and inexorably, of the teaching) is towards generalisation, it is not surprising that all but a tiny minority of students fail to respond to the subtleties that make literature what it is - and so, worth reading.

Characteristically, then, when the student does quote:

- "Idiots, swine!" Bernard Marx was saying to himself...
- Everyone belongs to everyone else.

she seems not to be alive to the potential of the words, or perhaps, has no time to pause and tease out their subtleties. Quotation has become merely a conventional device purporting to give conclusive evidence for the previous generalisation. This again is one of the most characteristic problems, both at 16+ and at A level(3).

The student's problems are not simply to do with generalisation, however; there are other, equally fundamental difficulties which prevent her, in our view, from retrieving her imaginative experience of reading. To understand these we have to look closely at her strategies in using language.

1. The choice between personal and impersonal stance

Although we can feel sure that this is a book she has read, and that she is drawing on her own reading as she writes, this experience is never acknowledged. Instead, there are stock uses of the passive ("he is seen"; "his views are portrayed") and of a collective "we" ("we see him as"; "this makes us think"; "then we get the opinion"). The effect of this stance is to make everything she says appear consensual, as if apparently objective truths were being asserted - not a personal "reading" of the text.

2. Informality/formality of relation with reader

Here the student is uncertain: at times she is highly formal ("his views and personal thoughts...are portrayed"; "this on its own earns him a strange reputation"): at others she is rather informal ("maybe he is a cut above the rest"; "he likes to fade into the background..."; "keeps himself to himself"). This uncertainty in itself tells us that she is not at home in her role. But there are a number of other signs that she feels awkward:

- why "in the beginning of the novel"?
- why "seen as a person who is an individual"?
- why "his views and personal thoughts"?
- why "Then we get the opinion"?
- why "This instantly reveals"?
- why "This, on its own"?
- why "open minded"?

None of these effectively prevents us from following her meaning (except possibly for "open minded", which is too shorthand). On the other hand, taken as a whole they suggest that she is not at ease, not confidently "showing how it changes", as the question demanded.

3. The degree of assertiveness/tentiveness

When the question itself assumes pre-existing and definitive "knowledge" of a character, the student is offered no encouragement to be tentative. And in coaching for the exam it is very easy for the teacher to offer an assumed consensual, authoritative position (not to speak of Coles' notes). Thus nothing remains problematic in literature.

Of course, there are some facts/ficts in a novel that are incontestable: Bernard has a high rank in society, is an alpha plus, and is a specialist in hypnopaedia. Equally there are opinions or comments that are so general that we would hardly think them worth debating: Bernard Marx is a complicated character, has a strange reputation, and is (not just seems) different from others. But surely there are qualities in his behaviour that are more open to interpretation - as with any

rounded character? (What precisely do we make of someone who goes along corridors muttering to himself "Idiots, idiots!"?).

Possibly the only time the student is aware of alternative interpretations in these paragraphs is in the suggestion that "maybe he is a 'cut above the rest'". And for the next two and a half pages there are no further signs that she recognises that an interpretation may be contestable.

It seems natural to ask at this point how sure one can be that what we have been calling "effects" are actually the result of key words in the question. It might equally be thought that they result from a certain style of teaching, which has limited what the student is capable of producing. Fortunately, in this particular case the alternative hypothesis can be tested. The second half of the question offers rather a different set of key words. Let us study these carefully, and then see whether in fact the student's writing strategy changes. The wording, you may remember, was: "Do you have any sympathy for his situation?"

KEY WORDS	THEIR IMPLICATIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS
do you have any ..?	The question form gives the student room to discover that her feelings may be ambiguous, and thus allows for some tentativeness.
you...sympathy	These words invite the student to write from a personal stance, and to express her feelings and attitudes towards the character.
any sympathy.. his situation	The possibility of discussing an ebb and flow of sympathy (or antipathy) in a given scene is ruled out by the word "situation", which calls for generalised treatment of the character in relation to his society and milieu.

Faced by this disjunction in her assignment, what the student does is to start again on page four of her essay! Let us see what she does.

Sometimes I sympathize with Bernard's situation, sometimes I do not. I think this is because Bernard himself is constantly changing and is very insecure. When I find myself sympathizing with him it is when he has worked and finally feels he has achieved something and then he is snubbed by everyone else. This brings out Lenina's feeling of wanting to 'comfort and pet him'. I also sympathize with him because he is so different. It affects him adversely. He is shunned and left out just because he has not grown as tall as he should be. I also sympathize with his opinions because I think most of them are formed unconciously through eyes of hate and revenge and he does not give people the benefit of the doubt. This in turn means that he gets things wrong and others in his society scorn and mock him.

Sometimes I do not sympathize with him because he does not support his thoughts. He thinks of everything and thoroughly but when the time comes he feels he will not be able to express them properly or feels they will be laughed at. He has done all the work and then does nothing about it. He also withdraws from views and discussions of a group too quickly. He gives up too easily. He allows his views to be crushed and beaten into the ground. He makes no attempt to make a come back. This irritates me. He seems so feeble and weak when really he is just as capable and has the same ability as everyone else.....

Two questions seem to arise from these paragraphs of "part two": has the student's strategy as a writer been affected, and has it been changed for the better? By and large, she seems still to be responding in terms of general traits (as part two of the question required). Admittedly, she half intimates that she is thinking of particular scenes "when he has worked and finally achieved something" but she keeps to generalities - and we must remember as teachers that she has now reached page four of her essay, and here she is starting all over again!

Much more important is what happens to the quality of her response and the confidence and control of her writing. Let us look closely at her new strategies.

1. The personal stance

Perhaps because she can speak authoritatively about her own feelings - which only she knows - there is a ring of confidence from the opening sentence. Personal judgements are offered:

- Sometimes I sympathise, sometimes I do not
- I think this is because Bernard himself is constantly changing.....
- When I find myself sympathising is when....
- I think most of them are formed unconsciously through eyes of hate and revenge....

The eloquence of the image in the last example catches the power of the unconscious forces within Bernard.

2. Relation with reader

There is no sense of awkwardness in her style; she feels no need to adopt an overly formal relationship to her reader. This sounds more like her "natural voice", uncluttered, still unsophisticated at times ("when I find .. is when"), but not without moments of literary force and terseness ("eyes of hate and revenge"; "scorn and mock him"). The quotation is effectively integrated into her own sentence ("comfort and pet him"). Just one word, perhaps, is imprecise: "I also sympathise with his opinions" effectively means "can understand why he holds" them.

3. Assertiveness/tentativeness

Within these paragraphs signs of tentativeness are limited to "I think this is because". However, as the opening sentence signals, the paragraph that follows discusses times when she does not sympathise, and allows a level of ambiguity in her response to emerge; for instance:

- He gives up too easily. He allows his views to be crushed...
- This irritates me. He seems so feeble and weak when really he is just as capable as everyone else.

Overall, there is not a lot of tentativeness in detail and indeed we feel this would not emerge unless she had the opportunity to look closely at specific moments in the story. However, the dichotomy of sympathy/not sympathy does allow for some complexity of response.

How the wording mis-directs response

So far we have looked at one question, and the response it evoked in one student. How typical is this of the questions set in the annual examinations at 16+?. We have chosen to look at a varied collection of papers from the most recent examination, Summer '84.

Perhaps the first thing we should say is that, seen as a whole, the G.C.E. and C.S.E. boards are not single-minded in their view of character, of written response, or even of reading. We will return to this in due course. For the moment, we wish to begin by analysing the strongest - indeed overwhelming - tendency that we found. We believe that this is potentially destructive of the kind of literary response most teachers and examiners are seeking to foster.

As teachers of Literature what would we think of the following as a reflection of our best teaching, indeed almost an "ideal type" of the way our students should learn to respond?

> Be a passive recipient of the text: "it" will "create your impressions", "reveal the character" and "show" what X is like, without your active participation. Thus, you can only offer consensual - not personal - knowledge, "pointing out what is revealed", "our feelings towards X" and what "we (all) learn" about "the effect on the reader". Aim to be definitive when you "outline the changes in X" and also "show the part he or she plays". Remember that the interpretation of literature is not problematic.
>
> Always generalise about characters, and assert the consensual view confidently (no use of maybe, perhaps or possibly, please!). "Show", by offering a small set of characteristic traits, "what sort of person" X is, "the changes in his or her attitudes", "in what ways X and Y are different - or similar",

and whether "X has as many bad qualities as good". Thus, when you "refer to the text" (as you must) to "support your answer", treat it merely as illustration of "the points you make".

Remember that your main role is to give an authoritative "description" or "explanation" of X; we don't want to know about your personal judgement of X, unless we specifically ask you. You should certainly be able to deal with one character in 30 minutes or so, and possibly two.

This would be laughable, if it were not for the fact that it is a tissue of quotations from several major boards![4]. What seem to be the mistaken assumptions behind such questions?

First, there are assumptions about reading. There seems to be a strange confusion between print on the page - "the text" as Louise Rosenblatt puts it [5] - and imaginative experiences ("the poem", as she says), which all individual readers have to create for themselves. "The character" of Othello or Tess is made up of what the individual actor or reader imagines that a fellow human being might have felt or thought as each successive word is said, or action reported. In constructing such a reading we each supply (and "live through") the passions, emotions, attitudes, ideas ..... as best we can. This process is never complete: each time we return to the text, even though we have prior knowledge and expectations, we have to create "the poem" afresh - and hope that, if we ourselves have grown, we have more to offer and more to discover as we attentively re-read the words. Thus, there can never be a complete, determinate rendering of a literary text.

At university level this is fully acknowledged when teachers like Leavis point out that "analysis is not a dissection of something that is already and passively there. What we call analysis is, of course, a constructive or creative process" [6]. It is this process that the typical character question has lost sight of.

But there are a second group of assumptions, this time about response. In most works of literature, characters are created as they act, speak and react, living through particular experiences.

Literature thus works in the main through particularising. And as we, the readers, create the characters moment by moment, we feel an ebb and flow in our sympathies for them which modify - as we go along - our progressive understanding and attitudes towards them. (Think of Pip and Magwitch, for instance.)

Of course, as we do this, we build up general impressions of the characters, too. But our knowledge of them has always to be grounded in particulars; generalisation has value only insofar as it is built from the understanding of moment by moment behaviour. The particular, in its complexity and ambiguity, is always richer than our generalisations will allow. And it is within the particular - in the progressive "movements of sympathy or antipathy, of assent or dissent" - that, as L. C. Knights says, "judgement from a personal centre" emerges.

Questions that fail to guide students towards particular events - and thus personal responses to characters in action - are missing one of the central facts about the nature of literary response. What's more, they play straight into the hands of teachers and publishers who are ready to provide untested generalisations for students to reproduce, while at the same time they force imaginative teachers to work against the grain.

More positive signs?

It is clear from what we have been analysing that there is a great deal to be concerned about in the teaching and examining of Literature at 16+. Small wonder that in Yarlott and Harpin's survey, so many students said they had no wish to go on reading Literature! (7)

However, it would be fair to say that the boards occasionally appear to be uneasily aware that an alternative approach to examining character may be possible. Admittedly the evidence is pretty limited - about seven questions in part or whole, plus the odd phrase, in five major G.C.E. 16+ boards! The direction they point to is nevertheless unmistakeable. Here is a further "ideal type".

> "Which of the human beings (in a work concerned with animals) do you find most interesting, and why?" "Is there any one character in Z for whom you feel a

special sympathy?" "Do you have any sympathy for X?" "Write about X's relationship with Y;" "What are your feelings about their conflicts?" "Do you agree with her that she should have stood up to him?" Look closely at their "dialogue"; consider their "changing feelings during the day", "X's state of mind" and "mood" at the opening, and "their motives in meeting".

The signs of change are very hesitant. Because there is no recognition that written literary appreciation normally depends on having the text in front of you for reference, the emphasis on generalisation and exposition persists, while particularity is relegated to a "support" role in the gobbet question. Even in the latter, however, the language and force of the questions is still not designed to assist students in their primary task, to create an imaginative experience based on the text. Admittedly, this approach would imply a total reconstruction of gobbet questions. So far as we know, only one board has been able to undertake such an enterprise, introducing Plain Texts and exploring their potential in a series of annual conferences for teachers and examiners concerned with this syllabus. Their work forms the basis for our next section.

SECTION 11 Emerging Alternatives

Starting from particulars

Imaginative English teachers, in working on a production of a scene, for example, or in preparing readings from a novel, will inevitably be concerned with the changing feelings and relationships, moods and states of mind, or motives and conflicts of the characters involved. As the students explore the scenes and share interpretations, they begin to build an understanding of characters, both implicitly and explicitly, and to take a stance towards them - admiration, delight, compassion, shock, bafflement, even horror..... Progressively, there will be an interplay between the understanding of a specific action (or utterance) and a growing sense of the habits of mind and patterns of behaviour the action stems from. If challenged, some students could probably sum up in terms of generalised traits what this character is like - but that is not the end, nor the final aim, of literary response. Something much more subtle, shifting and even ambiguous is at work, certainly in the case of rounded characters (as in everyday life).

If an important aspect of our work as English teachers is to encourage students to realise the complexity of human behaviour and personality, then, we must encourage response - whether in talking, dramatising or writing - that starts from particulars. In course work this is not difficult, providing the teacher can shake off the traditional model of exam questions. In examinations, this is impossible unless texts (or extended extracts from them) are made available.

The Cambridge Board have been experimenting with this approach at O Level for almost a decade. However, we believe that their experience shows how complex it is for teachers and examiners to break the mould of traditional assumptions and habits of thought. This has led to an unevenness in the nature of the questions, we would suggest; however, there is no doubt that at their best the Plain Text questions offer a new, alternative tradition.

Let us start then by looking at the new kinds of opportunity they are offering:

Study carefully the conversation between Brutus and Cassius in Act 1, scene 2, from "What means this shouting....." (line 79) to the return of Caesar (line 177).

When you look closely at what each man says here, and think about how he says it, what differences do you discover between them, in temperament and in the way they look at life? Show briefly how important these differences become later in the play. (June 1979)

Several of the phrases used here seem to be specially significant. Let us look at each in turn.

KEY WORDS	THEIR IMPLICATIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS
look closely...and think about how he says it:	This encourages students not only to read the text but to construct in their minds a dramatic interpretation, evoking feelings, attitudes and signs of interaction or reaction.
What differences do you discover (when you look)	The emphasis is on "discovery" as 'you' personally reconstruct the imaginary experience, so the writer is invited to extend past findings and possibly to report a process of exploratory response.
differences....in temperament.. and the way they look at life	The stock term "character" is not used; "temperament" is an open word, (allowing for a range of personal qualities to be explored), while - in this context - "the way they look at life" offers something more easily verbalised, if narrower in scope. The juxtaposition of the two is a valuable form of guidance.
how....differences become later (briefly)	The student is appropriately asked to consider the scene as a stage in

a developing relationship which is of crucial significance for the outcome of the play. But, given exam conditions, it is properly acknowledged that this can only be done briefly (indeed we still wonder if the examiners are asking for too much here in 40 minutes).

show how important.... these

We have reservations here: this phrase seems to be a regression. "Show" and "how" are both code words - to be discussed later - and ask the student to take on a different role (that of impersonal authoritative interpreter rather than personal explorer of meanings). Equally, is it right to assume that (only?) the differences discovered in this scene determine later events?

If we are correct in our analysis, this question takes us several steps towards an assignment that is based on and confirms good teaching. There is no room here for regurgitating "notes"! It is in the main a demanding, but rewarding, task.

In this analysis we have begun to show, then, what significant changes of direction the Plain Text teachers and examiners are opening up. Let us next try to sum up what is distinctive in their approach with a further "ideal type" paragraph, composed from papers set over the last seven years.

> Read, imaginatively reconstruct, and explore the experience afresh. "When you look closely at what each man says here, and think about how he says it, what..... do you discover?" Consider "whatever strikes you as particularly significant in their words and behaviour" ("especially when you bear in mind how their story ends"). "What do you find unexpected in their behaviour, attitudes and language? (you will need to think back to their

earlier scenes together.)" "How insane do you think he actually is?" You are already beginning to stand back a little to consider the characters. Now "what does this scene...add to your understanding of X and what she/he thinks is important in life?"

As you reflect, you are probably beginning to make personal judgements. "How do you feel about X at this point?" ("Remember your feelings may vary" within the scene). "What is your own response to X" as against the response of the characters in the story? "At the end of the story, what are your feelings about X?"

It is in language such as this, we would claim, that the Cambridge Plain Text examiners are escaping from the false or limiting assumptions that we have discussed earlier. By no means all the "character" questions follow this pattern but a significant number do. What have we learnt, as a seminar group, from the study of the wording of such questions? What kinds of instructions or guidance do we really want to offer students as they prepare to write?

1. A personal stance

The invitation to write personally allows two things to be acknowledged. First, with the text in front of them, each student is given the opportunity to create afresh and extend a personal, imaginative experience. The reader needs to be personally active, then.

Second, in contemplating the characters whose feelings, attitudes and reactions they have been actively "living through", students have a better chance to reflect on their behaviour and to make personal "judgements".

2. Relation with the reader, and role

With the opportunity to extend past exploration, a demand to describe or explain authoritatively for an unknown general readership is cumbersome and inappropriate. Besides, this demand is simply a trick; in exams no such readers actually exist! What students have the right to expect is a reader/examiner who is a sympathetic adult, believes they may be able

to discover something personally, and is interested to know about this.

The examiner's language, as quoted above, is giving the student confidence to believe this. Its directness and personal address signal this.

3. Both particular and general

It is crucial to literary response that students learn to read a text closely and to dwell on moments in the imaginative experience which they come to feel are significant. This is the point of asking them to focus on a key passage (and of teaching them to discover such passages for themselves).

When this happens, their writing necessarily has to work alongside the narrative or dialogue of the text, so it is natural for them to move into narrative - with interpolated commentary. "What is happening? - what's going on here?" are appropriate questions to ask(8). Rather than frown on or criticise such narrative, as some examiners do, we should ask how else the subtlety of human interaction is to be made sense of and conveyed.

Equally, the inner and outer events of a given passage inevitably take on a fuller significance when seen in the perspective of the story as a whole (or some longish section). We want to encourage this process as well.

In the course of exploring the consequences of this wider perspective, generalisations about characters and the way they behave may well arise naturally. Some students will fit this in as interpolated comment, others will want to develop a paragraph or more of generalised statement. This is where character traits appropriately emerge and can be thoughtfully considered.

4. Exploratory and tentative

It would be a foolish teacher who encouraged 16 year-olds to believe they had reached a final and definitive view of any major character; indeed we would hope that even mature teachers (and examiners) would hope to make discoveries when they revisit a text.

Feelings may be uncertain, and may vary from moment to moment. There may be unexpected explanations or discoveries, and unresolved problems. Readers with intelligent sensibility try, therefore, to remain tentative - to allow for exploratory reading to turn up more than they thought they knew.

A wording that suggests discovery, the unexpected, variety of feeling and possible interpolations leaves room for more than the definitive answer.

Working these ideas out in practice

Transforming a deeply-rooted tradition is bound to take time and a good deal of experimentation. We should like to see all boards, therefore, collecting and publishing a rich variety of exemplar material (together with commentaries). There would be obvious dangers in trying to be definitive, or in erecting "the alternative approach" on the same simplified lines as its orthodox predecessor. The principles seem to us clear, but there must be many different ways of implementing them.

With this caveat in mind, let us turn to an example here and consider its possibilities. Jean Blunt's class of 15-16 year-olds had been preparing for a traditional GCE Literature exam and reading Keith Waterhouse's novel "Billy Liar".(9) A group with a good knowledge of the novel were asked to choose a section they felt was important for the central relationship between Billy and Liz; they chose the major part of Chapter 8. Jean asked them to talk about Billy in general; first - would he make a good friend? Then, taking on the role of Billy, they filled in a questionnaire: "Young Adults and the Opposite Sex". Finally, turning to the actual words spoken by Billy and Liz, they looked closely at what each said.

The extracts that follow come from a timed "essay" written on the following experimental assignment designed by Jean:

"As you observe Billy in the record shop, what do you notice about his behaviour and attitude?

What explanations would you offer for this behaviour, bearing in mind what you know about him up to this point?

Briefly sketch out what significance, if any, this scene has for what happens to Billy later in the novel."

What "you observe" and "notice" seems to point to personal and detailed perceptions. "What explanations would you offer" calls for personal commentary and interpretation. Sketching "the significance ....for what happens" later might lead to a more impersonal stance, rather than a personal judgement. Given the enabling context, let us see how three students are able to deal with the question. We begin with the opening half of Dawn's composition:

> When Billy first enters the shop his behaviour is almost boisterous and rowdy. He is full of his own self-importance, and appears to want to 'prove' himself to Arthur. "Let's go take the piss out of Maurie."
>
> However, once inside the shop Billy begins to change. He is no longer so confident, infact he feels "old-fashioned", and in an attempt to boost this he "puts on an intellectual act". But looking around the shop he is surprised to find that he doesn't know anyone, indeed I am surprised to find that he doesn't know anyone.
>
> On meeting Stamp, Billy seems almost relieved. As much as he dislikes Stamp, it is, at least, a recognisable face. And during their short conversation Billy seems to regain some of his confidence. It is Stamp who informs him that his "mate's upstairs", and although no names are mentioned Billy knows instinctively who he is referring to.
>
> At the very thought of Liz, Billy feels a "quick, vibration running through" him, but when he actually meets her, he doesn't seem to know quite how to act. Infact, the pair of them seem to be evading the time when they will meet.

What seems to be the main achievements so far? To begin with Dawn places Billy as "almost boisterous", "rowdy" and "full of his own self-importance". But, she explains, he appears to "want to prove

himself to Arthur". This goes beyond his surface behaviour - and anything explicit in the text.

When, a few moments later, Billy looks around and "is surprised to find that he doesn't know anyone", Dawn interjects that she too is surprised! This suggests a tacit discovery about Billy himself - and possibly a tacit line of criticism about the credibility of this moment in the scene (and thus the author)? However, the discovery helps her to realise and (constructing from the text) to comment quite fully on Billy's relief when he does see "a recognisable face", even though it belongs to an enemy.

So, taking a personal stance, Dawn is already exploring the particulars and making discoveries from her close reading.

Let us turn to another member of this group, Michael, as he generalises after a similar detailed commentary.

> The main reason, I feel, for Billy's initial bravado, is to impress Arthur. In his presence he feels confident, knowing that he has an ally to back him up. But as soon as Arthur leaves him, he is alone, out of place and insecure. I feel that this is why Billy is so outgoing and imaginative - to cover his basic insecurity. That is why he prepares himself before meeting Liz - he is unsure what her reaction will be. As soon as she gives an encouraging reaction he is able to be himself more and rely less on his extravertness as a prop.

Michael is able to discriminate here between what Arthur brings out and what Liz does. With Arthur, Billy "feels confident" but still has "to impress" - thus the "initial bravado". With Liz's encouraging reaction", Billy "is able to be himself more" and to rely less on the "prop" of extravert behaviour. Placing these two moments leads Michael to set them in a wider context, interpreting Billy's "basic insecurity" and the "outgoing and imaginative" cover he takes refuge in. As a reader, he can see underlying tendencies behind quite differing relationships.

Anthony, a third member of the group, wrote one of the fuller pieces within the time constraints. Let's pick up from the moment when

Billy is told "Your mate's upstairs".

His mind is a kaleidescope of thoughts, memories, rehearsed snippets of things he will say to her. She is a port for him to shelter in, in his present stormy situation. "I walked slowly up the stairs, the noise fading into a cacophonous backwash."

He sees Liz, serving a customer, he puts of the moment of meeting. Billy tries to settle down. ("I was trying on expressions as though I carried a mirror about with me.") He can find no sensation or emotion of her.

When they finally speak, Billy does so very honestly without false bravado or reversion to Ambrosia. Liz brings out the best in him and he feels calm and secure in her presence. He likes her mystery, her enigma and he likes the way she understands him, knows him. ("She was the only girl who knew how to grin.") As he leaves her presence, he feels he must do something to impress Stamp, so he reverts to what he came in for, puts on a false face and takes "the piss out of Maurie."

Billy needs Liz. She is the only one who understands Billy properly. She calms him down, makes him tell the truth. He realizes she can do this. Billy never tries to spar off in his meetings with Liz; he doesn't need to impress her, she respects him enough already. He understands Liz and she understands. Billy respects her because she can leave town whenever she wants and he cannot. He likes her 'Bohemism' and 'escapism'. Billy likes her and this is proved by his including of her in his Ambrosian dreams.

I would expect Billy to react this way because of his previous experiences with people, as at the Kit-Kat where he and Arthur are joked about, but nobody greets them friendlliey.

Considering the book as a whole, the scene is very

important to us because it gives an in-depth view of Billy's character. We see that, even with his own peer-group where he thinks he is accepted as 'one of the crowd', in his heart of hearts he knows he is an outsider. He knows nobody and is friendly with nobody in the X-L Disc Bar. He often imagines that he does, but he doesn't and this leads to uncertainty and insecurity.

"I stood by myself, hesitating. The odd thing was that he seemed to know everybody and I didn't. In the No. 1 thinking it was sometimes the other way round."

We also see more of his relationship with Liz. Even though she does relax him he does not feel fully relaxed with her. He still talks to her in clichés occasionally and does not fool around (such as pretending to have flat feet and walking accordingly after coming out of the Roxy.) But she can cure him of this by saying, "Count to five and tell the truth." He realises this and respects her power over him.

However at the very end of the novel, he still cannot make a decision. Liz leaves without him and he cannot break his ties with Stradhoughton, but he has come the closest he has ever been to making a major decision in his life.

There are many achievements here that are parallel with Dawn's and Michael's. What else?

Anthony is very much alive to Billy's shifting mood and sensations. The "fading....cacophonous backwash" downstairs gives place to "thoughts, memories, rehearsed snippets." "She is a port for him to shelter." The reader is alert to the density of the text here, and the rapid kaleidescope of feelings.

When he does generalise, there is something characteristic about Anthony's tone:

> "Liz brings out the best in him and he feels calm and secure in her presence. He likes her mystery, her enigma, and he likes the way she understands him, knows him. ("She was the only girl who knew how to grin.") ..... Billy needs Liz. She is the only one who understands Billy properly. She calms him down, makes him tell the truth. He realises she can do this. Billy never tries to show off in his meetings with Liz; he doesn't need to impress her, she respects him enough already. He understands Liz and she understands...."

The language here suggests someone who is doing more than generalise in a detailed way: the writer is empathic and understanding about Billy's needs and the way Liz can help him. At the same time, the language evokes Billy's state of feeling, of finding shelter, of being recognised for once, direct and for what he is.

Finally, Anthony is carried into other scenes with Liz, and the limitations that are still present in their relationship. "He does not feel fully relaxed...still talks in cliches...but she can cure him." Tacitly Billy is recognised to be dependent: he "respects her power over him." And this, in a sense, prefigures the final scene between them, when "Liz leaves without him." There is no harshness in the final judgement - "he has come the closest he has ever been to making a major decision in his life."

Looking back at these achievements, what do they suggest about 16 year olds? Suppose, for instance, they could comment with the same insight and perceptiveness about one of their contemporaries in real life. Wouldn't we be rather impressed? What more would we want?

Such students and teachers now need the positive encouragement from the boards. Why should they have to be trained to produce timed essays, and to set aside the preparations and methods of exploration that an imaginative teacher, such as Jean Blunt, would want to foster? What would become of these students' insights if they were deprived of the text? With the current planning of GCSE there is now a new opportunity for broad reforms.

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(8) See Moffat J — Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Houghton, Mifflin 1968) for a discussion of levels of abstraction.

(9) We are grateful to Mrs. Jean Blunt and her fifth year pupils of Summerhill School, Kingswinford, Dudley, West Midlands for these examples.

The Southern Regional Examinations Board Writing Development Group

This group

- meets regularly to discuss a variety of uses of writing
- are currently working on how to optimise what students can learn from writing in the course of group or individual enterprises
- wants to set up a dialogue with other teachers of English and Communications in schools and FE colleges

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If you find these ideas useful, we would be very pleased to have feedback from you and your students. We'd be equally glad to hear about problems, additions and modifications you would like to suggest.

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